

News from Ed Markey

United States Congress

Massachusetts Seventh District

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
May 12, 1999

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NRC LETTER REVEALS UNRESOLVED "Y2K" BUG PROBLEMS AT NUCLEAR PLANTS

WASHINGTON, DC— Congressman Edward J. Markey (D-MA) today released a letter from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) regarding NRC's oversight of Y2K issues (computer problems associated with the rollover from 1999 to 2000) at nuclear power plants. The letter from Shirley Ann Jackson, Chairman of the NRC, to Rep. Markey dated May 3, 1999, responds to a March 10, 1999 letter Rep. Markey sent to Dr. Jackson expressing concerns regarding the adequacy of NRC and nuclear industry response to potential Y2K issues. The NRC response notes that all nuclear utilities "have adopted plant-specific programs that are intended to make the plants Y2K ready by July 1, 1999." Nonetheless, Chairman Jackson reports several concerns that have not yet been resolved.

Rep. Markey said on releasing the letter, "I commend the NRC for its increased attention to making sure nuclear plants will not be waylaid by the Y2K bug. Nonetheless, I continue to believe that the safe operation of nuclear plants requires more detailed oversight and aggressive action."

Among the key points in the NRC letter:

- **Pilgrim plant backup power:** The Pilgrim plant in Massachusetts has had repeated problems with its emergency diesel generators, which are required to keep the plant safe in the event of Y2K caused blackouts in the electrical grid. According to NRC's letter, the plant owner, Boston Edison, is raising the lower temperature limit for the generators, trying to improve air flow so that the generators will not exceed the temperature maximum, and increasing the required amount of diesel fuel oil to keep on hand. Despite the need to redefine, revise, and modify aspects of the backup at Pilgrim, and despite the recent revelation that one of the backup generators at the Seabrook plant in New Hampshire may have been inoperable for more than a year, the NRC maintains in the letter that the generators are "a reliable source of emergency power."
- **Safety related computers:** The letter notes that, "The NRC staff is not aware of any Y2K problems in nuclear power plant systems that directly impact actuation of safety functions." There are, however, problems with safety-related systems such as "personnel access controls and plant monitoring systems." If the plant staff cannot accurately monitor the plant, or cannot reach the plant controls, their ability to shut down the plant may be moot. The letter also acknowledges that in many plants the "security computers will require remediation."

- **Contingency planning:** Careful planning is critical to deal with any unexpected Y2K problems that do occur. Yet efforts in this area are lagging. The NRC letter states that "licensee Y2K contingency planning efforts have not progressed far enough for a complete NRC staff review, and therefore, additional oversight of this area is planned for the spring of 1999." Specifically, NRC plans to audit the contingency planning efforts of six nuclear utilities. NRC's own contingency planning is no further along. According to the letter, "The staff is still developing contingency plans and enforcement discretion guidelines for rollover dates."
- **Y2K ready, not Y2K compliant:** The letter defends a distinction by which nuclear utilities are required not actually to make sure software correctly handles dates in the new century (Y2K compliance), but to make sure the plant can still operate despite any software bugs (Y2K ready). The requirement of "Y2K readiness" was criticized by the General Accounting Office as being overly vague. The NRC letter specifically confirms that "an acceptable solution" in some cases is simply to set the clock back to 1972, which happens to be perhaps the high-water mark of the U.S. nuclear industry.
- **NRC oversight:** Local NRC inspectors at each nuclear plant are inspecting Y2K efforts this spring, and additional reports from the utilities on whether they are Y2K ready are due on July 1. The letter promises that the NRC will by September 1999 determine the need for additional orders "including, if warranted, shutdown of a plant," but suggests that such actions will likely not be needed.

Rep. Markey concluded, "The nuclear industry and the NRC are working hard to eradicate the Y2K bug. But all the core issues—the reliability problems with backup power systems, the paucity of utility reporting to the NRC, the vagueness of some NRC guidelines—remain unresolved as the implacable deadline looms. I will continue to work with all parties to make the transition of nuclear power into the next century as safe as possible."

A response to Rep. Markey's April 5, 1999 letter regarding the Seabrook generators is still forthcoming. Copies of the correspondence are available on request.

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